



A RIPE SCHOLAR.

BY WILLIAM LUDWELL SHEPPARD.

AUNT CLEMMY was working away at her knitting. For several months she had been working and nodding over the same stocking.

"'T ain't wuth while to hurry over de heel, chile, 'cause you might spile it; and den — dah!" she would say to Elsie, who made inquiries from time to time as to the progress of old Aunt's work.

Elsie was curled up in the old-fashioned sofa that afternoon. Her chin was sunk deep into the frilled yoke of her apron, and her hair hung in bronze-colored tresses about her cheeks as she bent over the book in her lap. The light was beginning to fade, and the brown shadows to lurk in the corners of the old wainscoted room.

Aunt Clemmy, just awake from a refreshing nap, was quite ready for conversation. She had made to her companion several remarks that remained unnoticed; so, in a louder tone, she tried a general observation:

"I always he-ared dat 't was perlite to answer folks's perlite questions."

Elsie had ceased reading at that moment, as the words were becoming illegible in the waning light, and she heard Aunt Clemmy's voice, but did not distinguish the words.

"What did you say, Aunt?" she asked as she regretfully laid her book aside. Aunt Clemmy repeated her remark.

"But, Aunt," apologized Elsie, "I was so interested that I did n't understand you."

"Dat 's what I say. I ain' so suttin' 'bout all dis readin', ef it 's goin' to draw folkses off from dere mahners an' ev' thing."

Elsie saw that there was danger of exciting a discussion, so she observed that she would go and find Mamma. The discussion which seemed likely to arise—at least Aunt's tone of voice was that which generally preceded debate—was an old one between Elsie and herself. As Aunt Clemmy stated it, it was: "Whether folkses was better wid book-larnin', or 'dout none," Elsie, of course, always stoutly maintaining the affirmative. Aunt was not alone in doubting the advantages of learning. Many of her race who had been slaves and never learned to read, were nevertheless prospering, so far as mere necessities were concerned, and consequently considered education superfluous. Several

days elapsed, and although Elsie spent a part of every afternoon in the old sitting-room with Aunt Clemmy, the favorite topic was not started by the old woman.

One afternoon, however, Elsie got up to draw her chair closer to a small fire which Aunt had lighted because it was growing chilly. Her stirring waked Aunt Clemmy, who immediately fell to knitting as fast as she could for a few moments.

(The older servants used to say that Aunt Clemmy, when a "li'l gal," used to knit by the side of her old mistress, who would give her a tap on the head with her thimble finger whenever she fell asleep, so that "the gal," on waking, would begin knitting as fast as she could, to pretend that she had not been napping,—and that Aunt Clemmy had retained this habit in her old age.)

"Honey," said Aunt Clemmy, after a vigorous spell of a few seconds at her stocking, to Elsie, who was blinking at the fire.

Elsie looked up, smiling, for the long delayed struggle "'bout dat 'vantages of edication."

"Honey," repeated Aunt Clemmy, "we 's been 'scussin' an' 'sputifyin' mightily 'bout l'arnin'—but I 's done change my min'."

"Why, Aunt!" exclaimed Elsie, startled into rapt attention by Aunt's unlooked-for surrender.

"Yes, honey. Yo' knows dat raskil gran'son of mine, Beyouregard, who 's done got a prize at school. Well, las' night when I wuz 'bukin' him 'bout de 'lasses—which it wuz mos' all gone outen the jug, an' dey wa' n't *nobody* to eat it but him, 'cause de cat don' like it—and which I 'buked him outen de word o' Scriptor, he ups an' sez, sez he, 'Folkses better know *how* to *sarch* de Scriptor, 'fo' dey alway' bringin' of it up ag'inst dere neighbors.' 'Fo' I could git the broom, dat boy got outen de door; but he shut it to so quick, it done mash his fingers,—i—yi! Dat settle me! I gwine l'arn how to read; dat what I gwine do."

"Why, of course, Aunt; and I 'm so glad of it. But how are you going to learn? Will Beauregard—?"

"Him! No, *marm*; not ef I *never* l'arn. Who but you, honey? You 's de very one. Ain't I been 'sputin' 'g'inst you all de time 'bout de 'vantages, an' you been talkin' so be'utiful 'bout 'em, dat I hated to wi'stan' yo'? But I did n' mean nut'n';

yo' ole Auntie did n' mean nut'n', crowdin' uv yo' so clus in de argyment, sometimes."

She drew the shapely head of her little girl against her knee and stroked the heavy tresses. She could not see the laughing eyes — laughing as

I done 'scuss with you? An' don't I kno' how smart yo' is, teachin' me uv multirication table — an' five an' fo' meks nine — an' all dem 'rethmetics?"

So it was agreed that Elsie should begin as soon as the old primer could be found.



"ELSIE SACRIFICES HER PLAY TO THE CAUSE OF EDUCATION."

well at the cause of Auntie's sudden conversion as at her ingenious plea for forgiveness.

"Well, Auntie, I will try. I'm only a scholar, myself, you know."

"Tain' wuth while fo' yo' to talk dat way. Ain'

Auntie Clemmy knew her letters, but not in the order which is generally observed. Her favorite form was "a, b, c, d, q, r, s, t, v." She never would admit that there was any use in knowing the succession of the letters. "I knows 'em by sight, chile,

an' I knows 'em by name, so it don' mek no difference how dey comes arter one 'n'er."

The primer was duly found, and Elsie one afternoon sacrificed her play to the cause of education. Aunty was shown the mysteries of a-b, ab, and b-a, ba, etc. She was to learn the list for two days, and then to say it without the book.

Elsie sat up straight on the old hair-cloth Chipendale sofa and began.

"A, b, Aunty; what does that spell?"

"A, b, aby."

"Oh! Aunty — *ab*. Now b, a." She could not help making the little word on her lips, but Aunty answered confidently, "Beeyca." In like manner c, a, became "Seeyea." Elsie felt like both laughing and crying. The result was very mortifying to her as a teacher; but it was difficult to keep from laughing at Aunty's serene confidence in herself.

Several trials developed no symptoms of further advance, and Elsie began to lose hope of success. She prevailed upon her brother Tom, who generally came in from play every evening too sleepy to study his own lessons, to try his hand at hearing Aunty. Aunty gave very nearly the same answers to Tom, but when she answered that a, g, spelt "Agy," Tom rolled over on the floor and roared with laughter, until Aunty threatened to report him to "he paw soon's he come fum de Co't House." Elsie took the book from his hand and went crying to her mother.

But Elsie had much determination in her character, and would not abandon Aunty as a hopeless scholar. She consulted Mamma about the matter. Mamma proposed to her to try the old rhyming method, and gave her several rhymes connected with the spelling of words of one syllable. Elsie's hopes revived, and she renewed her lessons to Aunt Clemmy. The jingles amused the old woman prodigiously, and frequently during the day Elsie's Mamma would hear the old scholar running over,

"A-b, ab, I cotch a crab,
N-o, no, I let him go,
I-n, in, I cotch him ag'in."

The whole family became interested, and, as the old rhymes did not hold out very long, they began to devise new ones for Aunty's education. Every

advantage, too, was taken of the association of ideas in aiding the memory, as rat and cat, house and mouse, etc.

One jingle ran in this way:

"C and a and t, spell cat.
R and a and t, spell rat."

Aunty would frequently say *make* instead of *spell*, from the "rethmetics" coming into her head. Sometimes she twisted the first line into "C and a and cat, make tea," and when her attention was called to the change she never failed to laugh until the tears rolled over her "specs."

Unfortunately, the arrangement of the rhymes in couplets, being once fixed in Aunty's mind, became unchangeable. Consequently, in spelling a sentence the outcome was rather bewildering. In reading a little sentence like this one (she knew *is* and *in* and *the*, by sight), "The rat is in the pigpen," the effect of the mixture of rhymed syllables in her mind would appear thus: "The r-a-t rat, and the c-a-t cat, is in the p-i-g pig, and j-i-g jig, p-e-n pen, and h-e-n hen." When Aunt Clemmy finished reading this, or some similar sentence, and Elsie would ask what it all spelled, she would get this for an answer:

"Hi! ain' I jes' done read it all over to you, lovely? an' you wan' me say it all over again?—Yo' ain' got no *mem'ry*!"

After some weeks' trial the lessons became fewer and fewer. Elsie saw that they were fruitless, though she never hinted as much to Aunty; and Aunty was so satisfied that her education was completed at two syllables, that she did not complain when the lessons stopped there. But the younger servants who could read were disposed to amuse themselves over Aunty's pretensions to "edication." "It 's hard to teach ole dog new tricks," some would say. And Beauregard, in spite of his relation to the old woman, was as bad as any of them, and so aggravated Aunt Clemmy that one morning she said to Elsie: "Honey, I been s'archin' de Scripters an' done see heap o' words I knows; 'speciallin' *a's* and *the's*, but I 's gettin' 'long slow, and would be glad if you could fin' me some good tex' fur bad boys, ez dat Beyouregard 's gittin' wuss an wuss! I ain' got no time to l'arn no mo' o' dish yer readin'."

